

Measuring Divinity: Pavel Florenskij's Integral Vision of the Finite and the Infinite

“The building of culture is defined by the spiritual law: ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’ (Lk 12:34). This treasure is spiritual value, that which we recognise as the objective meaning and justification of our existence.” Pavel Florenskij wrote these words in 1924 to an American audience. His firm belief was that a culture is born of any given group of people who hold some “treasure” or other to be “objective” and which would “justify” their existence. Cultures, therefore, are inherently diverse, entropic, and dependent on the space that any given people occupy at any particular point in time. The more diverse the cultures, the more diverse are the values of meaning. What brings all these cultures together is their common recognition of the need for “meaning” and a “justification of our existence.” In other words, “our personality and, therefore, all its manifestations are determined by our treasure,” continues Florenskij.¹

Through this Colloquium, the Faculty of Theology continues to stretch out its hand of friendship in collaborating with other Faculties in search for this “treasure” and “justification.” The crux of this Colloquium and, so to say, the “culture” that it intends to continue promoting at our University is *Integral Vision*. Even though for the naked eye, the encumbered mind, Science and the Humanities might seem worlds apart; a Colloquium, a Dialogue, will bring us closer to realising that even though our languages differ, our ‘treasure’ is the same, namely, our common search for meaning and justification.

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¹ Pavel Florensky, “Christianity and Culture,” *The Pilgrim* 4, no. 4 (1924): sec. 4.

This was also Florenskij's project. He also wanted to contemplate the world as a whole. In a letter of the 21st February 1937, which he writes to his son Kirill from the Solovki prison, he says:

I wanted to write to you about my work or, more precisely, about its meaning to me, its inner substance, so that you could continue what life has prohibited me from elaborating and fulfilling. [...] What have I done in my entire life? I have contemplated the world as a whole [целое], as a wholesome picture of reality. At each phase I approached my work from different perspectives. [...] Points of view change, one enriches the other; this is the reason for the constant dialectic of my thought and its orientation for seeing the world as one whole.²

Thus, Florenskij faced the very same question of meaning, firstly of his personal life, then of his teaching at the Moscow Theological Academy, where he taught between 1908 and 1917, and lastly also of the future of Russia during the Soviet regime.

Firstborn of Aleksandr Florenskij, Engineering Director of the Trans-Caucasian Railway, and artist Olga Saparova on 9 January 1882, Pavel Florenskij was brought up in a household that was equally scientific and artistic, and which looked upon religion as a taboo or, at best, as a social duty. Young Pavel was imbued by the beauty of Nature and the mysteries that it held. The Caucasian Steppe of Georgia and Azerbaijan, his home for the first 18 years of his life, was for him not only the scene of frequent expeditions with his father but also the beginning of his search for objectivity. His pure scientific rigour compelled him to leave not one stone unturned. Then, as he was going through his first interior crisis, a particularly hot summer day in July 1899 shook the foundations of the scientific worldview he had held so dear. Florenskij's newfound intuition – arrived at painstakingly – was the “complementarity” and “interpenetration” [взаимопроникновение] of the two different planes of reality, the natural and the interior one. Having lived up to that point by the criteria of pure science, he had dissected and prioritised the phenomena and processes of nature above all other planes. He had isolated his fascination with the Mystery of Nature from his scientific work. But at this point, Florenskij came to realise that the interior, mystical world need not exclude the visible, natural one; they just had “different coefficients of value.”³ He continues:

² Павел Флоренский, *СЧТ*, вып. 4, 672.

³ Павел Флоренский, *Детям моим. Воспоминания прошлых дней. Генеалогические Исследования. Из Соловецких писем. Завещание* (= серия Голоса Времени), сост. игум. Андроник (Трубачёв) et alii, предисл. игум. Андроника, коммент. подгот. игум. Андроника et alii (Москва: Московский рабочий, 1992), 214.

In the depths of my soul, the other world was always and without any doubt authentic and real. This perception [of another reality] did not just regard the depth lying beneath the natural elements of nature, the spiritual side of plants, rocks and animals, but also of human persons and, particularly, the saints. The sensation of the constant presence of my departed aunt was within me in quite a special way. Her delicate closeness was more real to me than when she had been alive.⁴

Having enrolled at the Department of Mathematics and Physics at the University of Moscow, where he was to continue living for the rest of his life, he came in contact with Nikolaj Bugaev who introduced him to the ideas of Georg Cantor and the latest developments in philosophical mathematics. He ended his studies with a dissertation entitled *On singularities of plane curves as places disturbing its continuity* wherein he discussed his proposal of discontinuity as a vital component of his integral worldview. Like his mentor Bugaev and the Moscow (Pythagorean) School of Mathematics, Florenskij was especially attracted to the theological connections of discontinuous functions, “the very thing which provoked such strong negative reactions from the Petersburg Mathematicians, with their strong positivist orientation.” He also published the first article ever in the Russian language about Cantor’s set theory. He did this not in a scientific journal, but in the short-lived journal of the Religious-Philosophical Society. The Society strongly advocated finding new paths for the revival of religious life in Russia, including freeing the Church from the control of the State to which it had been subordinated since Peter the Great in the 18th century. The Society, however, was suppressed in 1903 for its liberal proposals. During this time, Florenskij attended additional classes by the well-known philosophers Lev Lopatin and Sergej Trubeckoj in philosophy, philology, history of art, and poetry.

Having graduated first in class in 1904, Florenskij turned down the Chair of Mathematics offered him and took up another course, this time in theology, at the Moscow Theological Academy of the Trinity-St Sergius Lavra, where he eventually started to teach History of Philosophy in 1908. Serving between 1911 and 1917 as the Editor of *Bogoslovskij Vestnik*, the journal of the Academy, he took the opportunity to continue developing his integral vision by means of the academic programmes and articles he used to publish.

During his time at the Academy, he produced what was to become one of his most popular works, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, which took shape gradually over a period of 10 years, between 1904 and 1914, through the publication of four different versions, and which to date has been translated in 10 languages. Florenskij’s thought is evidently characterised here by his inter-

⁴ Павел Флоренский, *Детям моим*, 217.

disciplinary approach, bringing together pure science, philosophy of language, literature, art criticism, culturology, and theology. At his doctoral defence, he says the *Pillar* is a “part of my soul, as any book must be.” The “justification” – to which we referred at the start of our introduction – that Florenskij was searching here was God. More precisely, “in what way can we know that God is God? By means of reason, we must put God to the test to discover who he truly is as Truth and Saviour.” There are, according to Florenskij, two ways for objectivity: theodicy and anthropodicy. Theodicy is the objectivity that comes from the Truth itself. There can be coherent meaning in the world because the Truth reveals itself, justifies itself, and is something so total that is not even afraid to contradict itself. This, in other words, is the ontological, metaphysical plane; the justification of God. Anthropodicy is the objectivity that comes from self-abasement, detachment from oneself, to be saved from oneself, “to save our interior world from the chaos that hides in it.” This, in other words, is the phenomenological, concrete, experiential, sacramental plane; the justification of Man. Any work on our part is always on the border between these two worlds, the metaphysical and the phenomenological, the abstract and the natural, the artistic and the scientific, the noumenal and the phenomenal, the spiritual and the worldly.⁵ The *Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, as a matter of fact, constitutes Florenskij’s work on the Theodicy, whereas *On the Watersheds of Thought* and *Philosophy of Cult*, his Anthropodicy, was for the most part written but never finished for publication.

Florenskij was also an ordained priest of the Russian Orthodox Church. He married Anna Michailovna on the 25th August 1910 and went on to have five children. He was then ordained on the 24th April 1911. His name remains synonymous with his white cassock which he used to wear publicly, even at the time of the Soviet regime after the 1917 Revolution. When the Academy was closed down, Florenskij was instrumental to convince the State authorities to transform the Lavra in a museum rather than destroy hundreds of years’ worth of history and culture. A Joint Commission was formed, with Florenskij as its Secretary, which had the colossal task of creating an inventory of the entire monastery. Florenskij’s eye for detail is seen not just in his explanations of the hundreds of artefacts that decorated the monastery but also the smells and the general atmosphere that was felt there. Most importantly, the 1920s saw Florenskij’s most productive years. His writings range from *Iconostasis*,

⁵ Павел Флоренский, *Разум и диалектика*, in *СЧТ*, вып. 2, 131-135. See also: *Догматизм и догматика*, in *СЧТ*, вып. 1, 550-553; *Столы и Утверждение Истины*, 1914, 638; *Философия Культа*, 4/3.

Philosophy of Cult, Reverse Perspective, and *The Cultural-Historical Place of the Christian Worldview* (as opposed to the Soviet advances of an atheistic cult, also called *proletkul't*, the cult of the proletariat) to *Imaginary Numbers in Geometry*, and the writing of 127 articles for the 23-volume *Techničeskaja Enciklopedija*, on which he also worked as Co-Editor even after he was imprisoned.

Although Florenskij had been offered a chance for a safe exile with his family to Czechoslovakia, he chose to remain in Russia with those who were less fortunate. He cooperated with the State in several Government projects of a scientific and also industrial nature, but then at the height of Stalin's *Great Purge* between 1936 and 1938, he was tried for treason and participation in monarchist propaganda. Florenskij humbly accepted the false accusations brought before him to save other men and their families. In 1933, he was sent to the Svobodnyj lager, in the Far Eastern region of Russia, and in 1934 he was transferred to the Solovki lager in the Finnish archipelago. In prison, Florenskij was made to carry out experiments on the properties and possible industrial use of iodine, marine algae, and permafrost. In 1937, the Solovki lager was closed down and all 1,150 prisoners were transported to the Toksovo forest in the Leningrad region, shot, and left dead without informing any family members. It was the 8th December 1937.

His name was later cleared by the Moscow Town Judiciary in 1959, which found his trial to be without basis and fundamentally flawed in the way it was conducted. A death certificate with the correct date of Florenskij's death was issued to the family on the 24th November 1989. His writings remained largely hidden from public view until 1990 when the re-publication of his most famous work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, started a long chain of events that would see Florenskij's other major works published, some of them for the first time, and even translated.

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